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SIPDIS

WHA FOR BSC
SAN JOSE FOR USAID/OFDA TIM CALLAGHAN AND PHIL GELMAN

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [UY](#)
SUBJECT: URUGUAY SUFFERING FROM DROUGHT, FIRES

¶1. (U) This telegram is sensitive but unclassified, and not for Internet distribution

Summary
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¶2. (U) Uruguay is currently experiencing a severe drought that is affecting its dairy and beef industries and causing forest fires and human suffering in certain areas due to unavailability of potable water. Recent rains have alleviated the situation somewhat, and the GOU has made a bulk purchase of water storage tanks for the most affected areas. Still, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidency and emergency management coordinator Jorge Vazquez requested help from the U.S. November 28 to fight the fires in the northern part of the country. Specifically, Vazquez asked for several "Bambi Buckets," which are used by helicopters to drop water onto flames, and the Embassy and U.S. Southern Command are responding to that request. End Summary.

Primarily Economic Effects Thus Far
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¶3. (U) The drought is causing economic hardship as it affects Uruguay's most important export sector, agriculture. Hundreds of head of cattle have died as some pastureland is unable to grow enough feed. Additionally, future harvests of soybeans, corn, and sunflowers will be affected as young plants are unable to take root in dry soil. Critics blame the government for not taking measures to mitigate the drought, which, combined with lower prices and lower demand for agricultural commodities, has dealt a devastating blow to the industry. The GOU, however, has announced a plan to alleviate some of the effects of the drought, including rapid implementation of loans and assistance in providing fodder to local producers in danger of losing their farms as a result of the crisis. In any event, the decreased planting and a lower yield of calves will likely lead to future economic hardship for Uruguay's producers.

Forest Fires and Human Suffering
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¶4. (SBU) Recent rains have reduced the extent of the flames, but forest fires continue around the country. The GOU's National Emergency System (SNE) has reacted quickly to the threat and has deployed fire fighters as necessary. The GOU has also purchased significant numbers of 500 liter water storage tanks for the areas most affected by lack of potable water. However, the GOU lacks the equipment necessary to mount a fully effective response, according to Prosecretary Jorge Vazquez, who oversees the SNE. Specifically, Vazquez stressed Uruguay's urgent need for four Bambi Buckets (mechanisms used to dump water from helicopters). Vazquez said Uruguay has seven UH1-H helicopters that are suitable

for firefighting, but only three Bambi Buckets.

The USG Response

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15. (SBU) USAID/OFDA dispatched Buenos Aires-based officials to conduct a needs assessment on December 4-6. The Embassy's ODC office responded expeditiously to locate funds and begin the purchase of four buckets, each with a 1,000 liter capacity, at a total cost of USD 65,000. Funding has arrived from Southcom's Humanitarian Assistance Program, and delivery is expected by December 19. USAID/OFDA regional advisors remain in close contact with both federal and departmental officials with responsibilities related to disaster relief. The SNE has promised to forward to OFDA and the Embassy a list of equipment priorities (e.g. protective clothing for volunteer or non-professional firefighters enlisted to fight wildfires). We are expecting that list shortly, and will follow up with OFDA. At this time, the GOU is not issuing a disaster declaration or requesting broad international relief assistance.

Comment

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16. (SBU) Possibly as a result of climate change, droughts have become common in Uruguay over the past 10 years, and the GOU appears to understand the need for investment in infrastructure to anticipate future occurrences. In the interim, the GOU greatly appreciates our assistance, and we will continue to monitor the situation and work with OFDA, Southcom and the GOU to ensure that Uruguay's humanitarian needs are being met. We will also ensure that ordinary Uruguayans learn that the U.S. is stepping up to help. End

Comment.

Baxter